

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1092

INFO AMEMBASSY PANAMA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BOGOTA 3568

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E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: ELTN, EAGR,CO

SUBJECT: USPOLICY TOWARDS THE DARIEN GAP HIGHWAY -- IS A
CHANGE IN ORDER?

1. SUMMARY. THIS CABLE PRESENTS THE EMBASSY'S (STATE)
VIEWS REGARDING US POLICY TOWARDS THE DARIEN GAP HIGHWAY.
AS WE SEE IT, THERE ARE THREE BASIC OPTIONS: A) PROCEED
AS IN THE PAST, B) REVERSE OUR COMMITMENT, OR :) STIMULATE
THE AFTOSA PROGRAM BY DOMIFYING OUR POLICY TO PERMIT SOME
CONTRACTION TO BEGIN AS SOONAS THE INJUCTION IS LIFTED.
AFTER EXAMINING THESE OPTIONS, WE CONCLUDE THAT THE LAST IS
THE MOST VIABLE. END SUMMARY.

2. THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT WE HAVE A COMMITMENT TO ASSIST
COLOMBIA TO BUILD THE DARIEN GAP HIGHWAY. THE POLITICAL
COMMITMENT WAS MADE BY PRESIDENT NIXON; THIS HAS BEEN RE-
INFORCED BY BILATERAL AGREEMENTS AND BY CONGRESSIONAL FUNDING
COMMITMENTS FOR HIGHWAY CONTRUCTION AND THE AFTOSA
PROGRAM. THE BILATERAL HIGHWAY AGREEMENT IS SUBJECT TO
FUNDING RESTRAINTS BUT DOES NOT HAVE A SPECIFIC WITHDRAWAL
OR ABROGATION CLAUSE. THE USDA FUNDING OBLIGATION ENDS
NEXT YEAR. HOWEVER, THE AGREEMENT ITSELF REMAINS IN FORCE
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INDEFINITELY, SUBJECT TO A 90 DAY TERMINATION CLAUSE.

3. IN SPITE OF THESE COMMITMENTS, ACTUAL HIGHWAY CONTRUC-
TION HAS YET TO BEGIN IN COLOMBIA, ALTHOUGH IT IS PROCEEDING
IN PANAMA. THE REASONS FOR THE DELAY IN CONSTRUCTION HERE
ARE WELL-KNOWN -- FIRST, THE CONCERN OVER THE SPREAD OF AFTOSA
AND THE USG DECISION TO POSTPONE CONTRUCTION UNTIL AN EF-

FEKTIVE CONTRO PROGRAM IS IN PLACE AND, SECOND, THE COURT INJUNCTION WHICH PROHIBITS FOR THE TIME BEING ANY FURTHER EXPENDITURE OF US FUNDS FOR HIGHWAY CONTRUCTION IN COLOMBIA.

4. THE INJUCTION PROVIDES US AN OPPORTUNITY TO STEP BACK AND REVIEW OUR POLICY TOWARDS THE DARIEN GAP HIGHWAY. IN EMBASSY'S VIEWS, WE HAVE THREE BASIC OPTIONS: A) PROCEED AS IN THE PAST, B) REVERSE OUR COMMITMENTS, OR C) STIMULATE THE AFTOSA PROGRAM BY MODIFYING OUR POLICY TO PERMIT SOME CONSTRUCTION AS SOON AS THE INJUCTION IS LIFTED. THESE OPTIONS ARE DISCUSSED BELOW.

5. OPTION NUMBER ONE - PROCEED AS IN THE PAST. PROGRESS THUS FAR IN OVERCOMING THE RESTRAINT IMPOSED BY AFTOSA CAN BE ATTRIBUTED ENTIRELY TO USG INITIATIVES. WE HAVE BROUGHT PRESSURE TO BEAR ON THE COLOMBIANS TO MAKE THE AFTOSA PROGRAM WORK AND WE HAVE SUPPLIED MOST OF THE FUNDS FOR IT. MAXIMUM PROGRESS HAS BEEN HAMPERED BY ORGANIZATIONAL AND FUNDING DEFICIENCIES IN ICA, THE COLOMBIAN AGROPECUARIAL INSTITUTE. THE HIGHWAY PEOPLE, INCLUDING THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC WORKS, ARE READY TO GO AHEAD WITH CONTRUCTION AS SOON AS THEY GET THE GREEN LIGHT. SO FAR, HOWEVER, THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT PUBLIC WORKS IS PRESSURING AGRICULTURE/ICA ON AFTOSA CONTROL. ANYTHING RESEMBLING PRESSURE COMES FROM US, PRIMARILY AT THE PERIODIC SRG/CG MEETINGS.

6. OUR ORIGINAL FUNDING COMMITMENT OF THE AFTOSA PROGRAM ENDS NEXT YEAR. IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT WE WILL BE ABLE

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TO DEMONSTRATE BY THAT TIME THAT AFTOSA IN THE HIGHWAY REGION IS UNDER CONTROL AND WILL REMAIN UNDER CONTROL WITHOUT A FURTHER INPUT OF USG RESOURCES. ASSUMING THAT THE CONGRESS WILL AUTHORIZE ADDITIONAL FUNDING, USDA WILL CONTINUE TO PARTICIPATE IN AN AFTOSA CONTROL PROGRAM, ALTHOUGH CERTAINLY ALONG DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONAL LINES THAN THOSE THAT CURRENTLY EXSIST.

7. IF WE PROCEED AS WE HAVE IN THE PAST, THE RESULT PROBABLY WILL BE COMPLETION OF THE HIGHWAY AT AN UNDETERMINABLE DATE IN THE FUTURE WITH THE COSTS OF THE DELAY INCREASINGLY YEARLY. THERE IS ALWAYS THE POSSIBILITY, MOREOVER, THAT THE CONGRESS WILL REFUSE ADDITIONAL FUNDING, LEAVING US WITH THE COMMITMENTS AND NO MEANS TO FULFILL THEM.

8. OPTION NUMBER TWO- REVERSE OUR COMMITMENT. GIVEN THE LACK OF PROGRESS IN CONTROLLING AFTOSA, THE WEAK SUPPORT OF THE PROGRAM BY ICA, THE EVER-RISING COSTS

OF CONSTRUCTION, AND THE PROSPECTS OF INDEFINITE USG EXPENDITURES FOR AFTOSA CONTROL, IT WOULD NOT BE DIFFICULT TO GENERATE SUPPORT FOR THE POSITION OF TERMINATING OUR COMMITMENTS AT THE EARLIEST POSSIBLE MOMENT. ONE COULD ARGUE, WITH A REASONABLE DEGREE OF ACCURACY, THAT THE DARIEN GAP HIGHWAY IS NOT HIGH ON THE ROAD PRIORITY LIST OF THE GOC AND THAT CONSTRUCTION OF THE HIGHWAY IS NOT A CRUCIAL QUESTION IN OUR CURRENT BILATERAL RELATIONS. CONTRARY TO WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN PANAMA, THE GOC HAS NOT FORMALLY PROTESTED THE INJUNCTION.

9. IF WE REVERSE OUR COMMITMENTS, WE WILL, OF COURSE, CUT OUR FINANCIAL LOSSES. HOWEVER, THE DARIEN GAP HIGHWAY IS NOT A PROJECT THAT CAN BE VIEWED IN ISOLATION. IT IS THE FINAL LINK IN THE PAN AMERICAN HIGHWAY SYSTEM (ALTHOUGH NOT OFFICIALLY SO DESIGNATED) AND, CONFIDENTIAL

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AS SUCH, IS OF AT LEAST EMOTIONAL INTEREST TO ALL PAN AMERICAN COUNTRIES. THE US HAS BEEN CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH PLANNING AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAN AMERICAN HIGHWAY AND TO DISASSOCIATE OURSELVES FROM A CONNECTING SEGMENT WOULD, AT MINIMUM, LEAD TO CHARGES OF BAD FAITH. MOREOVER, WHILE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HIGHWAY IS NOT A CRUCIAL QUESTION CURRENTLY IN OUR RELATIONS WITH THE COLOMBIANS, OUR CONTINUING PARTICIPATION IN THE PROJECT GIVES US SOME CONTROL OVER WHEN AND HOW IT WILL BE BUILT. IF THE COLOMBIANS EVENTUALLY BUILD THE HIGHWAY WITHOUT OUR PARTICIPATION (CONTROL), THEY MAY WELL DO SO WITHOUT AN ADEQUATE AFTOSA PROGRAM. THE DANGER OF THE SPREAD OF AFTOSA NORTHWARD COULD LEAD US TO A) OPPOSE THE COLOMBIAN DECISION TO COMPLETE THE HIGHWAY (ALSO KNOWN AS MEDDLING IN THEIR INTERNAL AFFAIRS), EITHER UNILATERALLY OR IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE MEXICANS AND CENTRAL AMERICANS, AND/OR B) SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASE OUR AFTOSA CONTROL PROGRAM IN PANAMA, WITH THE DISADVANTAGE THAT IT PROBABLY WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO EXTEND THE SANITARY ZONE BEYOND THE BORDER.

10. FINALLY, COLOMBIAN LEADERS, IF THEY WISHED, COULD MAKE A PUBLIC ISSUE OVER OUR DECISION TO REVERSE OUR COMMITMENTS. IN RECENT CONVERSATION WITH AN EMBASSY OFFICER, LEADING PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE JULIO CESAR TURBAY MADE SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE DARIEN GAP HIGHWAY AS A POTENTIAL PROBLEM AREA IN OUR BILATERAL RELATIONS. THE RESULTS OF A

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ACTION ARA-10

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INFO AMEMBASSY PANAMA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BOGOTA 3568

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REVERSAL OF OUR COMMITMENTS COULD RANGE FROM LOW LEVEL
CRITICISM IN THE PRESS TO A COOLING OF BILATERAL RE-
LATIONS TO DELIBERATE OPPOSITION AGAINST SOME OF OUR
INITIATIVES IN THE OAS AND THE UN.

11. OPTION NUMBER THREE - MODIFY OUR POLICY TO PERMIT
SOME CONSTRUCTION TO BEGIN. IF WE CAN AGREE THAT WE
HAVE MORE TO LOSE THAN TO GAIN BY REVERSING OUR
POLICY, AND IF WE CAN ALSO AGREE THAT PROCEED-
ING AS IN THE PAST WILL RESULT IN EITHER A MORE EX-
PENSIVE HIGHWAY COMPLETED AT AN IMPOSSIBLE-TO-DETERMINE
DATE, OR IN HAVING OUR OPTIONS FORECLOSED BY THE US
CONGRESS, THEN AN ARGUMENT CAN BE MADE FOR ATTEMPTING
TO STIMULATE THE AFTOSA PROGRAM BY MODIFYING OUR POLICY
TO PERMIT SOME CONSTRUCTION TO BEGIN AS SOON AS THE IN-
JUNCTION IS LIFTED, ALTHOUGH, ADMITTEDLY, THIS COULD
STILL LEAVE ACTUAL COMPLETION UNCERTAIN. BY SOME CON-
STRUCTION, WE REFER SPECIFICALLY TO PROJECT I -- RIO
LEAON TO LOMAS LAS AISLADAS -- THE 30 KMS. OF WHICH PASS
THROUGH THE MOST ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE AREA OF THE DARIEN
GAP HIGHWAY. SURVEY AND DESIGN WORK HAVE BEEN COMPLETED.
THE TENDER DOCUMENTS COULD BE ISSUED ON SHORT NOTICE.
THE ATRATO SWAMP AND RIVER WOULD REMAIN AS NATURAL
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BARRIERS TO THE SPREAD OF AFTOSA.

12. THE ADVANTAGES OF PROCEEDING WITH PROJECT I ARE

SEVERALFOLD: A) WE COULD SPEED UP THE AFTOSA PROGRAM (AND EVENTUAL COMPLETION OF THE HIGHWAY) BY MAKING A DIRECT LINKAGE BETWEEN A DECISION TO PROCEED AND SATISFACTORY AND IMMEDIATE ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES IN ICA, THOUGH REPRESENTATIONS AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS, B) WE WOULD OPEN UP AN AREA TO GREATER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, C) WE WOULD REALIZE SOME DOLLAR SAVINGS BY BUILDING PART OF THE HIGHWAY NOW RATHER THAN LATER WHEN COSTS HAVE INCREASED, AND D) WE WOULD DEMONSTRATE OUR WILLINGNESS TO PROCEED WITH OUR COMMITMENTS TO THE MAXIMUM EXTENT FEASIBLE, THUS REDUCING THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE HIGHWAY BECOMING A PROBLEM AREA IN OUR BILATERAL RELATIONS.

13. THERE - FOR ALL THESE REASONS, WE BELIEVE THAT OPTION NUMBER THREE IS THE MOST VIABLE FOR US TO FOLLOW, AND WE RECOMMEND IT TO THE DEPARTMENT FOR CONSIDERATION.
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